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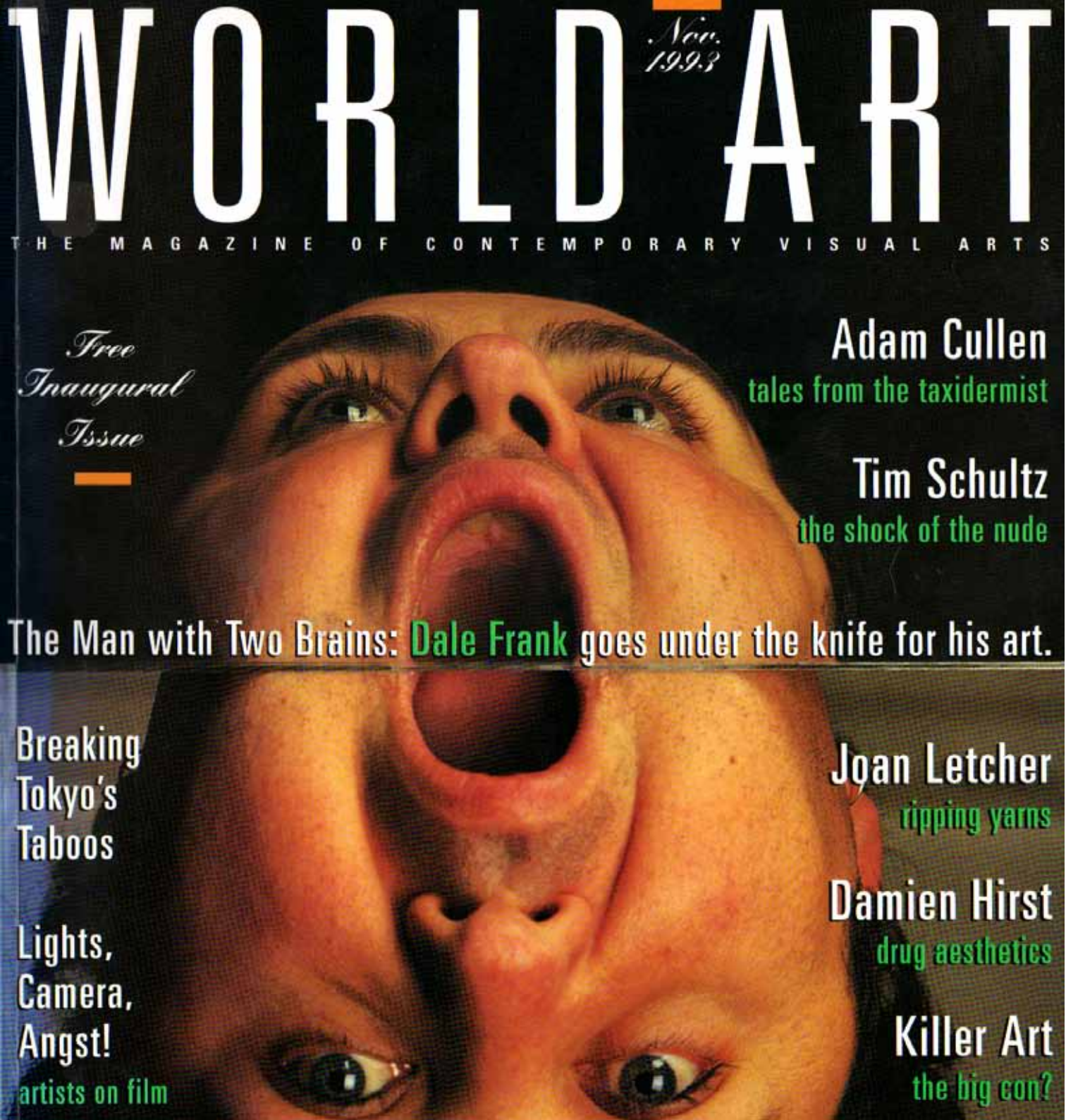
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Has Tim Schultz sold his soul for Platonic enlightenment?
Anna Clabburn uncovers this classicist of the macabrely erotic.

TIM SCHULTZ'S home is a Baroque cave of visual dreams and erotic nightmares where velveteen couches, voluminous floral curtains and ceramic curios blend with hundreds of gaudy images wall-papering the three storey building. Small, iconic pictures of gypsy she-wolves dot the architraves while bulbous homages to French voluptuousness pout and pose from the cramped staircases and half-lit corners; carnivorous land-ladies awaiting non-monetary payment of the rent from the impoverished artist. It is a world where good and evil are irrelevant, moral definitions and beauty co-exist with horror in a beguiling portrait of human ambiguity.

Schultz speaks ambivalently about his environment, but suggests it may well be the cause of his quick turnover of house mates. He states unequivocally that he deals with the Devil when he paints. After several experiments with hard drugs over the years, he maintains his encounters with "bad nature" and darkness are genuine: "These things really do exist".

His depiction of humanity's shadowy side is a veritable hallucinogenic fantasy land, complete with 5-D monsters and taloned beasties. Entering his house is a little like crossing the threshold into the Underworld.

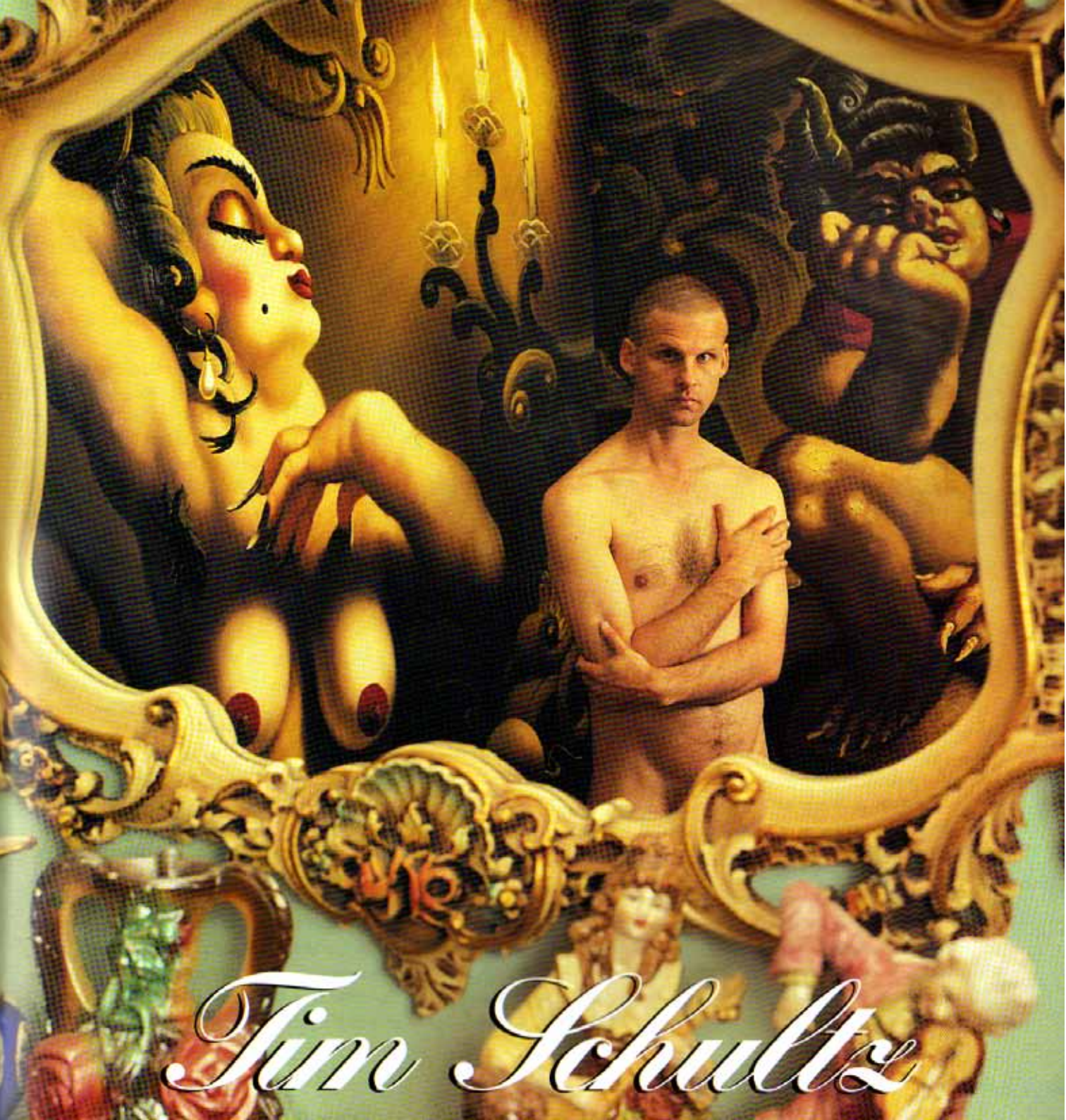
Schultz's contemporaneity lies in his fascination with philosophical notions of taste, propriety and self-hood, expressed through these strange amorphous subterranean beings: "I think about my work in the context of contemporary life more than art itself," he says. It is an existential quest which lies outside conc-

eptual artistic fads of the '90s, but finds ideological company in the art of other architects of artifice such as Matthÿs Gerber. "People have talked about my connection with Matthÿs Gerber, whose work I like. He's connecting to a similar idea about modern life – the look of things, the gloss of things, the emptiness of things too."

However, while Gerber's art is a cynical resignation to the kitschness of all visual representation, Schultz maintains his art is more optimistic and "heartfelt" because he makes no attempt to deny the ultimate facade of artistic expression: "Art now is basically a critical process about the means of representation. That's not interesting. In my paintings I try to make a scheme of representation within the picture which is coherent. I don't want to deconstruct the language, I want to construct as much of a language as is possible. I've never been interested in painting as illustration as such. The negative space of painting is its immanence, where it stands on its own without referring to the world."

Schultz is primarily interested in what he calls "pure artifice – style, simulacrum – the idea of the image being its own falsehood or its own truth".

"I don't see my work as kitsch," he insists. "There is an idea of aesthetic truth as opposed to moral truth in my painting, and that's something I quest after. I suppose that's beauty." However, his definition of "beauty" is problematic. It is closely bound to his notion of a surrogate reality; a "painted world" which rejoices in its own rhetoric, but also intimates inherent forces of ugliness and beauty in human nature: "I want to make a type of beauty which



Tim Schultze

This malevolence is enmeshed in a

isn't like nature, which is obviously where you go to look for what is really beautiful. My work is man-made, to do with human creations, like the macabre – we presume nothing in nature knows it's going to die, but humans do." Accordingly, his depiction of human beings is unflattering, garish and raw. Coiffures, beauty spots, overly long finger nails; these are the unsightly reminders of human vanity and the tragic failure to exist beyond appearance.

Applying elements of northern European nihilism from Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, Schultz suggests existential awareness is a human blight which art (and the artist as mediator) can help transcend. This Gothic utopianism is becoming a common sentiment in contemporary creative genres, film being one of the most obvious, and is characterised by a desire to use art as a means of overcoming the constrictions of human consciousness. Peter Greenaway and David Lynch are no more pioneers in macabre 'beauty' than Schultz. All are paying homage to an old and rich Dionysian heritage, apparently undergoing some sort of timely revival in the 20th century.

Evidence of this renewed interest in the pejorative side of humanity is prolific: the release of previously banned violent films such as Pasolini's *Salo*, the spate of documentaries on serial killers and the increasing popularity of sado-masochistic or 'black comedy' plots. The revival extends to literature also, with tales of Count Dracula re-emerging in Anne Rice's popular "Vampire Chronicles", alongside the conspicuous number of 'real-life' publications containing tales of violent aberrations in human behaviour.

However, Schultz's fascination with abhorrent humanity is not rooted in the terror of the modern world. His malevolence is enmeshed in a rich web of atavistic, evil eroticism stemming from a classical base; specifically, from the writings of Plato. In *Republic*, Plato wrote about a cave where humanity was enslaved in chains, forced to sit with its back to a fire and watch the shadows of its own existence on the wall. Despite the darkness of this picture, Schultz regards this "bound" state as an essential stage in human spiritual growth: "Plato's cave is an image of our life, trapped within falsehood. I love that image of the abyss and the cave of artifice. Art is the truth which conceals that there is none."

Schultz aligns his aspirations for his own artistic expression with those of the ancient Greek philosopher: "According to Plato

there won't need to be artists or philosophers in Utopia, because the artists remain in the cave (striving to lift humanity to the Apollonian realm of enlightenment) – they glorify artifice and falsehood and won't be needed once we can see the 'truth'."

Until the apocalyptic enlightenment, however, Schultz is keen to continue his Faustian quest for truth as an unashamed figurative painter. His garish nudes are derivative in that they construct their powerful presence from the visual tradition of European Baroque and Rococo decoration, capitalising also on the satire implicit in these fastidious traditions: "I like just about all old painting. I've graduated through the centuries – starting with a fascination for Michelangelo and Italian Mannerism, to Bernini, Rubens and, through him, to the Rococo and Boucher."

There is a strain of classicism in Schultz's mimicry of Boucher's poses. Schultz copies and interprets Boucher's work continuously, but it is tampered with by his beguiling self-directed humour. This 'Boucher phase' has nearly passed, Schultz says. Having exhausted his interest in these idylls, he is now feeling a pull towards a more contemporary frame of reference, which he intends to realise via "more ambitious scenography" and larger canvases.

In recent paintings the surface is carefully worked and polished, and his trademark 'push-button' nipples still stand out from the canvases as they did in earlier studies. These invitations

to touch are stylised in a manner similar to pop artist Tom Wesselman's Great American Nudes, but exude an abundance, or "resonance" as Schultz likes to call it, which removes them from the tacky archetypes of 1960s popular culture and allies them instead with older, and possibly purer, obsessions with surface. His fetishism is as much an appreciation of the 'old art' as it is of the female form he portrays: "Oil paint, to feel, is just like skin," he says.

Looking around the walls, his works remind a viewer (or voyeur) that centuries prior to the 20th were still indulging in unmediated decadence. The modern world has tinged such pleasures with the knowledge of excess and, much to Schultz's distress, removed any possibility of innocent hedonism.

Sensual pleasure is a key to Schultz's visual vocabulary. The majority of his figures are female and many of the images are openly sexual – some with legs splayed in classic porn poses. This candour has sometimes attracted gender-based criticism and



Psyche, 1992, oil on canvas, 135 x 115cm

rich web of atavistic, evil eroticism.

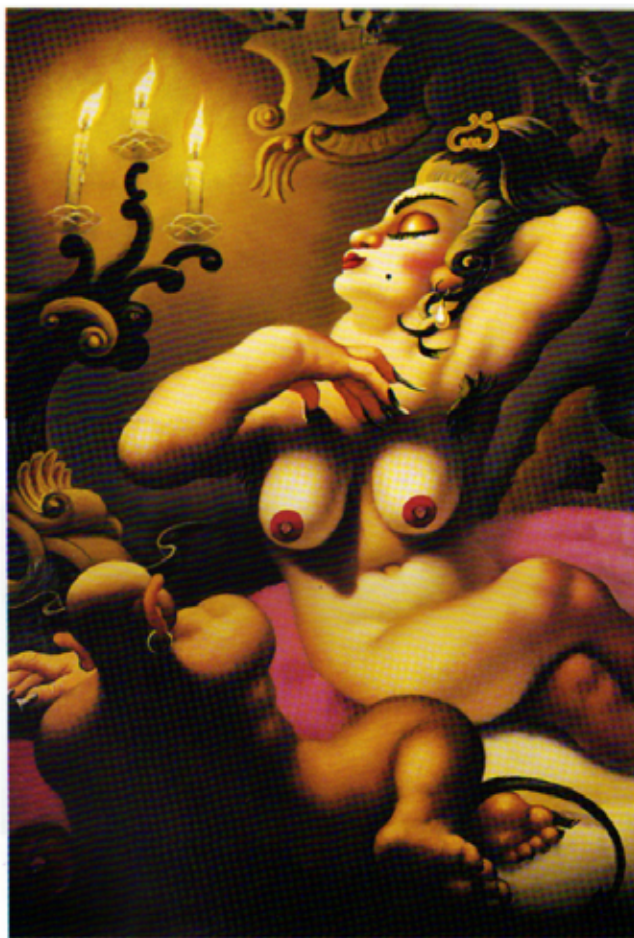
caused a few members of the 'gentle sex' to raise their ideological eyebrows. Strangely, any political judgment is quickly subverted by the self-conscious falsity of the images themselves; even Schultz has a tendency to say "I don't know why but...", as if the imagery has an intention of its own.

Although he concedes that there is a deliberate eroticism in the work, Schultz describes the construction of femininity in terms of his overall aesthetic intention and his desire to challenge the viewer. When he speaks about the pure physical pleasure of his painting, and its deliberately staged quality, his genuine feel for the medium makes any judgment about the gendered innuendo of the work seem trivial: "My art is about pleasure. It's to give pleasure. The flesh is very important, it is the skin of the painting. Sex is an important element in my painting, but more 'fetishisticly' than 'hedonistically'. I don't find much pleasure in trivial things, the best pleasure comes out of deep resources. I suppose my depiction of the human figure contains an aspect of cruelty."

He allows for ambiguity in the reading of his images and believes in the constructive value of 'shock': "My work is not user-friendly and tends to run head-on against all kinds of politically correct ideas - there's an element of antagonism in it which I do intend. I want to make the work as high temperature as possible."

Schultz's explicit foregrounding of human sexuality has led to mixed critical reception to date, although three inclusions in the conservative Sulman Prize are among his exhibition credits. This ambivalence may be due to critics' inability to slot his work into a definitive genre or contemporary 'scene'.

As the only painter in a recent group show, "Shirthead", at Mori Gallery in Sydney, Schultz inspired critical enthusiasm but, he claims, in a myopic fashion: "It was taken partly in terms of the hype about grunge - but I think the show itself transcended any sort of simple labelling and, without sounding arrogant, it was partly due to my being in the exhibition; you couldn't call it simple grunge or simple installation. It was more interesting."



The Curse, 1993, oil on canvas, 244 x 170cm

Schultz reveals a personal bias here which reflects his classical opinions on the priority of painting over other, mediated modes of contemporary expression: "Painting starts as nothing, whereas installation starts as refuse, objects reconstituted." He believes anything which is as unique as painting is far too complex to 'die' and is capable of 'rebirth' *ad infinitum*. So much for the frequently forecast 'death of painting'.



In every sense Schultz's art is a celebration of the paradox of images. His love of facade has led him into designing several stage sets for theatre, and his immediate plans include an exhibition next year with Sydney painter, Wendy Sharpe. Based on a core of small erotic images, the collaborative nature of the show will, he hopes, alleviate any strong gender-based objections to the images and allow viewers to appreciate the work on a purely aesthetic level.

Although Schultz deals in extremes and revels in the horrid and torrid side of humanity, there is a carefully conceived control to his painterly world. "I don't want unrestrained hedonism," says Schultz. "I don't experience it very often." Perhaps a look into his luminous cave of fantasies will provide some clues along the way to enlightenment.